

# Gender Ideology and Women's Autonomy in Colleen Hoover's *Regretting You*

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## Abstract

This study investigates the issue of women's autonomy through Colleen Hoover's novel *Regretting You*. With MacKinnon's dominance theory as a tool, this research paper explores the impact of patriarchal societal norms on power dynamics between men and women. The study's objective is to examine how gender ideology shapes women's choices without their awareness. By investigating the consequences of these norms, this study aims to focus on how sexual dominance inhibits female autonomy. The study employs a qualitative research method, specifically close textual analysis with thematic coding, to identify recurring motifs and character archetypes. Through this approach, the study examines how the novel portrays women as oppressed, victimized, and objectified within the dominant cultural discourse. The findings of the study indicate that internalized patriarchal norms have a significant influence on female characters' attitudes towards domestic violence. Ultimately, this study emphasizes how systemic oppression impedes women's ability to make autonomous choices and underscores the importance of addressing issues such as domestic violence and sexual domination through the experiences of female characters.

**Keywords:** Power dynamics, female autonomy, patriarchy, sexual domination, dominant culture discourse.

## Introduction

This research paper examines the obstacles that impede women's ability to achieve autonomy through the novel *Regretting You*. The novel explores the complex relationship between Morgan Grant and her teenage daughter Clara. *Regretting You* delves into themes of mother-daughter dynamics, first love, and grief. This research paper employs McKinnon's dominance theory to scrutinize power dynamics and gender roles within the novel. "Mac Kinnon's 'dominance theory' is about the link between power and knowledge in the context of gender: how 'epistemology and politics emerge as two mutually enforcing sides of the same unequal coin' (181). This theoretical framework offers a multifaceted approach to understanding power dynamics in interpersonal relationships, taking into account social, physical, and psychological aspects of dominance. In a previous study on *Regretting You*, the researcher investigated themes of resilience, grief, and familial bonds through narrative analysis. By combining dominance theory with literary analysis, the present study aims to deepen our understanding of gender roles, women's autonomy, and power dynamics in Hoover's *Regretting You*. The study employs a qualitative approach in the form of a close textual reading of the novel to uncover the barriers that restrict women's ability to make autonomous choices within the narrative.

### **Female Autonomy and decision-making skills**

Women's autonomy is defined as their ability to make independent decisions about their bodies, discrimination, and futures without external influence. However, various social, cultural, and political factors often hinder women's autonomy, limiting their ability to exercise their rights and make decisions about their own lives. Female autonomy is a significant aspect of feminist theory, particularly in the context of MacKinnon's works, which emphasize the systemic nature of gender oppression. MacKinnon challenges the liberal individualist perspective by focusing on "women" as a collective group rather than individual female persons. This approach compels readers to consider the status of women as a group, which is essential for understanding female autonomy in a patriarchal society. Men have been given decision-making authority, perpetuating the myth that they possess superior decision-making skills. As a result, women are oppressed and viewed as inferior, limiting their autonomy. Women's autonomy is defined as their ability to make independent decisions about their bodies, discrimination, and futures without external influence. However, various social, cultural, and political factors often hinder women's autonomy, limiting their ability to exercise their rights and make decisions about their own lives. It is essential to recognize that autonomy is not an absolute concept, and it is influenced by a range of factors, including socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and access to information and resources. By promoting autonomy and empowering women to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health rights, we can ensure that they can lead fulfilling lives and reach their full potential.

According to MacKinnon's dominance theory, women's autonomy is lost when they are unaware of their rights to freedom and autonomy. Morgan, as a mother, experienced a loss of ambition and life purpose in adulthood. Following the death of her spouse in an accident, she discovered that her partner had deceived her, and the event had a significant impact on her. At her thirty-fourth age, Morgan grapples with her identity and autonomy after the tragic deaths of her husband and sister. She reflects on her past decisions, including her early pregnancy at her seventeenth year of age, which forced her into adulthood prematurely. This journey of self-discovery is crucial as she learns to live for herself rather than solely for her daughter, Clara.

Clara's actions throughout the novel illustrate her quest for autonomy. Initially, she rebels against her mother's restrictions by engaging in risky behaviors, such as drug use and impulsive relationships. This rebellion is a form of asserting her independence and making sense of her chaotic world following her father and aunt's deaths. However, Clara, repeats a similar pattern to Morgan, as a contemporary woman, Clara possesses decision-making abilities, yet Morgan imposes traditional constraints upon her. This results in a repetition of Morgan's experiences for her daughter Clara. The novel serves as a reflection of real-life societal dynamics, where Morgan and Clara, despite their age differences, adhere to traditional norms and expectations due to societal pressures and conventions.

### **The Dynamics of Dominance**

The term "power dynamics" refers to the distribution, exertion, and negotiation of power within relationships and societal structures based on gender. In societies, power dynamics are typically influenced by patriarchal systems, which view men as superior and grant them positions of authority, while women are seen as marginalized and subordinate. Historically, men have held control over politics, business, religion, social and economic structures, and reproduction rights. This creates unequal access for women, who often lose their leadership, power, and reproduction rights due to male dominance. Men have been given decision-making authority, perpetuating the myth that they possess superior decision-making skills.

As a result, women are oppressed and viewed as inferior, limiting their autonomy. "Gender roles" are constructed by cultural and traditional factors and may vary based on geographical location.

Morgan's character initially embodies the traditional role of a woman in a patriarchal society, where her identity is largely defined by her relationships with men, particularly her husband, Chris. His infidelity and subsequent death force her to confront her subservient position, prompting a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. This shift highlights how patriarchal norms can limit women's identities and agency until they are challenged. Morgan's realization of her husband's affair forces her to reevaluate her worth and the power dynamics in her relationships. This betrayal acts as a catalyst for her growth, pushing her to seek a more equitable relationship with Jonah, where mutual respect is prioritized over traditional gender roles. Jonah's character contrasts with the patriarchal norms represented by Chris. He embodies a nurturing masculinity that supports both Morgan and Clara in their emotional struggles. His role as a father figure allows for a healthier power dynamic, where support and understanding replace control and dominance. This shift demonstrates how positive male figures can challenge patriarchal norms and foster empowerment in women. Male domination is not merely an external force imposed on individuals but is a fundamental aspect of social organization. This perspective challenges the liberal feminist view that removing oppressive forces will restore preexisting equality. Instead, it posits that patriarchy is deeply embedded in societal structures and norms, requiring a more profound transformation to achieve true equality.

### **The Intersection of Power and Sex**

Autonomy, which encompasses the ability to govern oneself and take independent action, is a fundamental concept in the realm of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This capacity enables women to make informed decisions regarding their SRHR, such as whether or not to engage in sexual relations with their spouse or partner, to choose the method of contraception, and to seek and obtain sexual and reproductive health services. In the novel, Morgan falls in love with Chris, but her lack of knowledge about her reproductive rights makes her vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Consequently, she becomes pregnant at an early age, and her autonomy is compromised by Chris's controlling influence. Several theories of autonomy have been developed and applied to comprehend the difficulties faced by women. These theories provide a framework for understanding the complex interplay between individual agency and social structures that shape women's experiences and decisions regarding SRHR.

Women, like Morgan and Clara, often lack reproductive autonomy, and their partners hold the authoritative decision-making power. Morgan, a major character in the novel, experiences a transformation in her attitude towards freedom. Previously, men had captured and controlled her freedom, but she eventually decided to take matters into her own hands. Following her husband's death, Morgan chooses a new life partner and embraces his lifestyle without any societal expectations or judgments. She ultimately realizes that she had lost her entire life with the wrong person over the past few years and that she had been kissed by the wrong man all her life. As Hoover notes, "It's the realization that I've gone my whole life being kissed by the wrong man" (Hoover 226).

### **Navigating Patriarchal influence**

Dominance theory has demonstrated the position of women in a patriarchal society. Women are commonly portrayed as victims of sexual domination, and this is exemplified in the negative light in which women characters are often depicted. In the novel, Jenny's affair with Chris and Jonah's subsequent abusive

outburst illustrates this point. However, the development of a relationship with Jenny's sister, Morgan, at the end of the story suggests that society relies on women to portray men as good characters. This situation can easily render women as victims. In a patriarchal society, women are not viewed as a homogeneous group, but rather as interrelated individuals who share common experiences of inequality and powerlessness. As a teenager, Morgan feels a sense of emptiness, and her boyfriend uses her innocence to control her as inferior. She eventually realizes that she wants more out of life, but her journey is disrupted by an unplanned pregnancy.

Morgan, the protagonist in the novel, experiences a transformation in her attitude towards freedom. Previously, men had captured and controlled her freedom, but she eventually decided to take matters into her own hands. "I'm laughing so hard I roll onto my side in the fetal position because I'm using muscles I feel like I haven't used in forever. It was the first time I had laughed since Chris and Jenny died. It's also the first time I have heard Jonah laugh since they died" (Hoover 187). Following her husband's death, Morgan chooses a new life partner and embraces his lifestyle without any societal expectations or judgments. Clara, Morgan's daughter decides to start a life with the person she loves in opposition to her mother's wishes and does not turn to her for comfort. The novel also explores the complexities of mother-daughter relationships within a patriarchal framework. Morgan's insecurities about parenting and her relationship with Clara reflect the societal pressures women face. The imagery of the blindfold symbolizes the lack of awareness that often accompanies motherhood in a patriarchal society, where women are expected to fulfill certain roles without questioning them.

### **Deconstruction of cultural discourse**

The dominant culture often promotes a narrative of gender neutrality, which is inadequate in addressing the realities of power imbalances. Since hierarchy is the core issue, merely advocating for neutrality ignores the systemic nature of male domination. This approach can be seen as perverse, as it diverts attention from the actual structures of inequality that exist within society. In Morgan's case, the kitchen door symbolizes her discontent with the stable life she built with Chris. This door represents the sacrifices she made at the age of seventeen to ensure her daughter Clara's stability and attention, which she did not receive. However, as Clara becomes more independent, Morgan realizes that her intense focus on her daughter will no longer suffice. Morgan's deconstruction of the kitchen door signifies this transition, as she begins to act on her desires and destroy symbols of her past dissatisfactions. "I hit the door in the same spot over and over until the wood began to chip. Eventually, a hole begins to form, and I can see from the kitchen into the living room. It feels good. That kind of worries me" (Hoover 131). Women in the novel are impacted by the gender hierarchy, as evidenced by Morgan's teenage pregnancy, in which she does not even understand what an autonomous choice is. Moreover, her daughter Clara has a sexual relationship with Miller, who exploits her innocence without disclosing his past relationship. Morgan, as a mother, experienced a loss of ambition and life purpose in adulthood. Following the death of her spouse in an accident, she discovered that her partner had deceived her, and the event had a significant impact on her. However, Morgan's daughter, Clara, repeats a similar pattern. As a contemporary woman, Clara possesses decision-making abilities, yet Morgan imposes traditional constraints upon her. This results in a repetition of Morgan's experiences for her daughter Clara. The dynamics between Morgan and Clara reflect broader cultural conversations about motherhood and the expectations placed on women. The struggle for power and understanding between them illustrates the complexities of mother-daughter relationships in contemporary society. This discourse emphasizes the need for open communication and empathy,

challenging traditional notions of authority and control within familial structures. Studies emphasize that dominant culture discourse often fails to consider the intersectionality of gender with other forms of inequality, such as race, class, and sexual orientation. This oversight leads to a limited understanding of women's experiences, as it ignores how these intersecting identities shape their realities.

## Conclusion

In literature, women are often subjected to gender-biased judgments and unequal power dynamics, portraying them as weaker in the eyes of society. Similarly, Hoover's female characters are portrayed as weaker but in the case of her male characters, Chris is depicted as a good father to Clara, while Jonah is portrayed as a good father to Elijah. Thus Hoover's novel *Regretting You* illustrates the evolution of female characters and the obstacles that hinder their ability to exercise autonomy. In conclusion, Colleen Hoover's *Regretting You* is a powerful narrative that invites readers to critically examine the impact of gender ideology on women's autonomy. The novel's exploration of these themes not only enriches our understanding of gender dynamics but also underscores the ongoing need for societal change to promote true gender equality and empower women to realize their full potential.

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